

My Sister 293

Chapter 293 FREEDOM

SERAPHINA'S POV

The words slipped from my lips with surprising ease, despite the heaviness they bore.

They didn't tremble or catch in my throat. Instead, they settled between us with a gentle finality that surprised even me.

"I can't accept the bond."

Kieran didn't move. Didn't blink. Didn't breathe. It was as if his body had locked itself in place to keep something inside him from shattering outward.

Ashar stirred—a low, dissonant ripple that brushed the edges of my awareness before retreating, wounded but restrained.

The café noise rushed back in around us. Cups clinked. Laughter rang out too loud nearby. The espresso machine hissed like nothing monumental had just happened.

Kieran's gaze stayed on mine, and the sight of his pupils made my breath hitch.

They were dilated, blown wide in a way he couldn't hide. His breath turned shallow as if the air in the café had thinned.

I braced myself.

I'd witnessed devastation in him before—cars crashed, skulls cracked, power surging from him unchecked when he lost control.

But he didn't lash out.

Didn't raise his voice.

Didn't shatter the room.

Instead, his fingers curled tight around his coffee cup, knuckles blanching as he forced himself still. His jaw flexed once, then again.

When he finally spoke, his voice was hoarse, stripped raw.

"Why?"

That single word carried more weight than any outburst ever could.

The bond shuddered in response, sending a sharp echo of his pain racing up my spine.

Yet beneath that ache was something steadier.

I looked at him and, for a moment, I didn't see the Alpha in front of me.

I saw the girl I once was—quiet, hopeful, lingering at the edges of rooms, loving him from a distance so vast and telling myself that devotion might one day bridge it.

I felt more for her than I did for him now.

"I don't want to be bound anymore," I said, each word careful. "I need my choices to be mine. Not fate's. Not instinct's. Not even yours—no matter how much care you wrap around it."

My fingers curled around my mug. "If I walk toward someone, it has to be because I choose them freely. Not because some external force commands it."

His brow furrowed, and the confusion that flickered across his face was so genuine it nearly unraveled me.

I lifted my cup and took a sip of coffee, letting the bitterness bloom across my tongue, hoping it might distract me from the ache that spread with every heartbeat.

“Tell me something, Kieran,” I said quietly, setting the cup down. “If there were no mate bond, would you still want me?”

He didn’t hesitate.

“Of course,” he said. “I cared about you long before I knew. Before the bond—”

“How convenient,” I interrupted softly, tightening my grip on the cup. “It’s easy to say that now, but what about the last ten years?”

The words didn’t come sharp—they weren’t meant to stab. But Kieran inhaled like they’d done just that.

“You didn’t care then,” I continued, a bitter smile tugging at my lips. “Is it far-fetched if I believe you only really started to see me when the bond began to stir? The gifts and gestures...how much of it is really you? How much of it is influenced by the bond?”

As if on cue, the bond flared—Kieran’s guilt flooding through me in a rush that made my chest throb.

"I'm not here to punish you," I said. "Or tally your sins or drag us through the barbs of the past until one of us bleeds out. I've let those things go."

I met his eyes again.

"But letting go doesn't mean pretending nothing happened."

His fingers trembled against the porcelain.

"Every choice I've made these last ten years has been influenced by outside forces. But this—I need this to be my choice and mine alone."

"What about my choice?" he rasped out.

"I want to believe you love me," I said, voice bare. "I think you do—gods, I hope you do. But as long as the bond exists, I can never be sure if you love me because of it or for who I am."

"I love you for you, Sera," Kieran insisted, those words a desperate plea.

A lump rose in my throat, but I swallowed it down, forcing the words out steadily.

“Is there a way,” I asked, “for you to prove it with the bond in place?”

His head dipped, and he was silent.

For a long time—so long I wondered if he’d ever answer.

At last, he spoke, his voice rough as gravel.

“I want to say yes.”

His gaze caught mine again, his eyes deep as whirlpools threatening to pull me under. “I want to tell you I’ll try—once, twice, a thousand times. That I’ll endure anything, give up anything, if it means keeping you. If it means proving my love is true. But...”

A shudder ran through him, his grip on the mug so fierce that hairline cracks spidered along its edge.

“I don’t know if you realize, but this is the first time you’re not actively fighting against the bond. I can...” He swallowed. “I can feel your pain flooding in—raw, chaotic, threaded with fear and resolve—and it kills me that I’m the one who put us in this position.”

My lips trembled, and I pressed them tight, trapping the sob clawing its way up my throat.

“And the look in your eyes...” he continued, “it’s so achingly familiar.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, voice barely audible.

“You looked at me just like that the night I asked for a divorce.”

The memory of that night unfurled in my mind—the aching finality of Kieran’s choice, the struggle to hold myself together and accept it.

Was this the same moment, only reversed?

“I had ignored it then,” Kieran went on, pushing on like he had to get all the words out before he couldn’t anymore. “I pushed forward, convinced myself it was the right path for me.”

“Kieran, we don’t need to—”

He shook his head, and I fell silent. I realized he needed to speak his truth as much as I had needed to speak mine.

“You loved me once,” he said. “And I was blind. I took it for granted, and I was the one who walked away. What right do I have now to deny your choice?”

Slowly, as if it cost him dearly, he unclenched his fists from the mug.

He exhaled, his whole body seeming to deflate. “I meant it when I said I loved you—with or without the bond. If I truly believe that, I shouldn’t fear losing it.”

Kieran drew a deep breath, as if bracing himself against something internal and immense.

“I won’t force you,” he said at last. His voice was quiet, stripped of command. “If this is what you need...I accept it.”

His hand slipped to his lap, and he looked away. “Do what you need to do.”

I inhaled, the magnitude of his concession settling on me.

“I...I want you to know, Kieran—I don’t regret loving you.”

His jaw flexed once as I continued. “It hurt me, yes, but it also carved me into who I am today.”

He nodded, still unable to look at me.

“Thank you,” I whispered, and meant it with everything I had.

For letting me go.

For not fighting me when it mattered most.

Tears burned behind my eyes, but refused to fall.

“By the light—” My words faltered, and I had to stop, reorient, take several calming breaths before I could get the words out.

“By the light of the moon that binds us, I reject you, Kieran Blackthorne.”

The bond shuddered.

Then tore.

Pain struck, bright and sudden, stealing the air from my lungs. I pressed my hand flat to the table, eyes squeezed shut as the last threads that bound us unraveled.

It hurt. Gods, it hurt.

But beneath the ache was relief so profound it left me trembling.

Freedom.